

Kimberly Chantal Welch, "Sideways Fences: Resisting Gentrification in Boyle Heights, a Los Angeles Community," *Lateral* 6.2 (2017).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L6.2.4>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 6.2 (Winter 2017) — Not a Trump Issue

Sideways Fences: Resisting Gentrification in Boyle Heights, a Los Angeles Community

Kimberly Chantal Welch

ABSTRACT From the introduction of hipster IPA beer to fences that go sideways (instead of up and down), Oscar Arguello's *Sideways Fences* (2017) explores the gentrification of Boyle Heights, a predominately Latino/a community near downtown Los Angeles. Sol, the main character, is pregnant and lives with her boyfriend Estéban, who drinks too much and spends his discretionary time fixing up a '52 Chevy. Early in the play, Eva, Sol's sister, crashes with the couple. The play centers around the trio's stressed relationship and Sol and Estéban's upcoming eviction, which is related to the creation of new condos. While at first glance the play appears to embrace common stereotypes including the wayward Latina (Eva) and the alcohol prone Latino, a closer analysis illuminates Arguello's artistic layering of stereotypes to make legible the conditions/structures that produce the situations in which the trio find themselves.

From the introduction of hipster IPA beer to fences that go sideways (instead of up and down), Oscar Arguello's *Sideways Fences* (2017) explores the gentrification of Boyle Heights, a predominately Latino/a community near downtown Los Angeles. Sol, the main character, is pregnant and lives with her boyfriend Estéban, who drinks too much and spends his discretionary time fixing up a '52 Chevy. Early in the play, Eva, Sol's sister, crashes with the couple. The play centers around the trio's stressed relationship and Sol and Estéban's upcoming eviction, which is related to the creation of new condos. While at first glance the play appears to embrace common stereotypes including the wayward Latina (Eva) and the alcohol prone Latino, a closer analysis illuminates Arguello's artistic layering of stereotypes to make legible the conditions/structures that produce the situations in which the trio find themselves.



(L TO R): EDDIE DIAZ, RACHEL GONZÁLEZ IN *SIDEWAYS FENCES* AT CASA 0101 THEATER
AUGUST 18 - SEPTEMBER 10, 2017. PHOTO BY JORGE VILLANUEVA

(L to R): Eddie Diaz, Rachel González in *Sideways Fences* at Casa 0101 Theater,
August 18–September 10, 2017. (Photo by Jorge Villanueva.)

Arguello's depiction of Boyle Heights natives living through addiction interrogates inequitable access to mental health resources. Both Eva and Estéban self-medicate to deal with trauma; Eva inhales an undisclosed drug and Estéban drinks. When Sol confronts Eva about her drug use, Eva finally relays the events that led to her crashing with the couple: Eva's wealthy boyfriend's family sent said boyfriend to rehab and kicked Eva out of their home. Following this narration, Sol suggests that Eva move to Riverside to live with their mother who can help her fight her addiction. The juxtaposition of Eva's potential solutions with her boyfriend's illustrates the mitigating role class plays in dealing with mental health issues. In addition, when viewed in conversation with the sources of Estéban's drinking, the juxtaposition marks the diversity of issues tied to dispossession that people in low-income communities face.

Near the top of Act 2, Estéban proclaims, "My whole life is begging." In this remark, Estéban points to the enforced precarity of a large portion of Boyle Heights residents, a trend prevalent in low-income communities across Los Angeles. Despite the fact that Estéban has strong trade skills (evidenced through his success with the '52 Chevy), he does not earn enough money to support his family. Consequently, Sol continues to work at the ninety-nine-cent store while twenty-eight weeks pregnant. The couple has limited opportunities for economic advancement. Job opportunities are frequently tied to education. Unfortunately, resources to support higher learning historically have been less accessible for people of color, particularly ones from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This proves especially true today with Trump's (classed and racialized) attack on higher education through the cutting of funding as well as the elimination of the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals initiative. While the Trump administration has escalated the problem, the conditions in which Sol and Estéban find themselves precede Trump. This cyclical structure of enforced precarity, in combination with the strategic elimination of affordable housing in Boyle Heights for gentrification projects, further precarizes an already at-risk community.



(L TO R): JEANETTE GODOY, RAY RIOS AND EDDIE DIAZ IN *SIDEWAYS FENCES* AT CASA 0101 THEATER AUGUST 18 - SEPTEMBER 10, 2017. PHOTO BY JORGE VILLANUEVA

(L to R): Jeanette Godoy, Ray Rios, and Eddie Diaz in *Sideways Fences* at Casa 0101 Theater, August 18–September 10, 2017. (Photo by Jorge Villanueva.)

Estéban and Eva can legally be evicted from their home because technically, it is an illegal dwelling. However, the only reason the legality is put into question is because, as the *New York Times* claims (according to Estéban), "Boyle Heights is the hippest new neighborhood in America;" in other words, the affluent want to live in Boyle Heights. As newcomers move in, the housing market prices dramatically increase, pushing

predominately Latino/a Boyle Heights residents out of their neighborhood. As Estéban aptly notes, “People are leaving. No one can afford anything.” In *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Saskia Sassen argues that current categorizations of geographic space are inadequate to the task of illuminating expulsions, the ejection of people from specific places/spaces. She calls for “de-theorization” or looking from the ground up in order to illuminate trends of shrinking economies and growing expulsions.¹ I argue that *Sideways Fences* marks Boyle Heights as a productive site of de-theorization. Addressing gentrification in a historically Latina/o community (and arguably other places as well) requires an exploration of capitalism, state power, representation, and social relations, just to name a few of the power matrices contributing to the proliferation of displaced, primarily Latina/o bodies.² While recent actions by Trump-friendly neoconservatives spectacularly point to the racism prevalent in the United States, *Sideways Fences*, by pointing to the decades-long everyday battles Boyle Heights residents fight against gentrification, against the school-to-prison pipeline, and for survival, underlines that the moves made by the Trump administration and the recent highly-mediatized domestic acts of terror against minorities are, in fact, not shocking. The spectacular forms of violence mobilized in the Trump era are a continuation and national intensification of the racializing practices that support the spatial dispossession of Boyle Heights residents.

Mirroring the setting of the play, the production took place in the Boyle Heights community. By producing the play at CASA 0101 Theater and discounting tickets for Boyle Heights residents, producers Edward Padilla and Emmanuel Deleage strongly mark *Sideways Fences* as a play for the community. When Sol tells Estéban that “Life ain’t begging; it’s fighting—fighting for what you want,” she is not just speaking to the couple’s current situation. Characterized as the level-headed, strong madre figure, Sol does whatever is necessary to protect her baby. The play aligns Sol’s fierce commitment to her baby to her fighting the eviction and staying in her community. When Sol advocates for resistance, she calls on Boyle Heights residents (who notably, made up the majority of the audience the night I attended) to join the fight, in part by refusing to be dispossessed from their homes. This call for direct action situates *Sideways Fences* in a genealogy of US-based sociopolitical Latino theater, as well as in a growing body of contemporary work by Los Angeles artists and troupes who use theater to incite direct action in their respective neighborhoods.

As I sat watching *Sideways Fences*, I couldn’t help but be reminded of another place-based play about the gentrification of a neighborhood just down the street from the CASA 0101 production: the Los Angeles Poverty Department’s *What Fuels Development* (2016). As I have argued elsewhere, *What Fuels Development* chronicles processes of criminalization involved in preparing spaces for gentrification.³ It is a devised piece that uses a court hearing transcript to narrate Skid Row residents’ successful embargo on the addition of an alcohol-serving restaurant on the lower floor of the New Genesis, a mixed-use building that provides residences for the formerly homeless. Like *Sideways*, *What Fuels Development* draws on the skills of local artists to interrogate the increasing spatial dispossession of black and brown bodies in Los Angeles.

The two communities in question, Skid Row and Boyle Heights/East LA, are directly connected by Los Angeles’s 6th street bridge. As evidenced by these two productions, both communities are using art, theater in this specific instance, to fight against gentrification and other forms of dispossession. While the use of theater to incite social change is far from a new phenomenon, I wonder what kinds of new possibilities a collaboration between Skid Row and Boyle Heights artists dedicated to pushing back against gentrification might open up. In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black*

Study, Moten and Harney theorize the “undercommons,” fugitive communities functioning through a system of indebtedness that covets collectivity. For the scholars, “blackness is fantasy in the [ship] hold,” not only the fantasy of escape, but that hapticality, the indebtedness that thrives in the hold.⁴ If we understand blackness as tied to subject position rather than phenotype, then putting *Sideways Fences* in conversation with *What Fuels Development* prompts a consideration of what kinds of potentialities exist in the respective communities’ acknowledgment of a shared presence in the hold, a racist, classist, heteropatriarchal socioeconomic system markedly against their survival. What might the pooling of resources do? What might that resistance look like? What would it mean for these neighboring communities to come together and fight against “fences that go sideways instead of up and down?”

Notes

1. Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014). [↗](#)
2. While Boyle Heights originally began as a Jewish site, it has been a Latino/a community for many decades. [↗](#)
3. Kimberly Chantal Welch, “*What Fuels Development?*” by Los Angeles Poverty Department,” *Theatre Journal* 6, no. 4 (2016): 659. [↗](#)
4. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 95. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



Kimberly Chantal Welch

Kimberly Chantal Welch is a black feminist scholar and doctoral candidate at the University of California, Los Angeles in the PhD Program in Theater and Performance Studies. Broadly speaking, her research explores the intersections of performance, homelessness, and incarceration. With an emphasis on spatial structures and their relationship to constructions of race, gender, and sexuality, Welch's work addresses historic and contemporary forms of spatial dispossession in California and Louisiana.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.
ISSN 2469-4053